The Sun's Debt: Human Sacrifice, Conquest, and the Architecture of Aztec Power

A Case Study in Belief Infrastructure Construction in Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica

Thomas J. Bryan *with Claude (Anthropic)* · *February 2026*

A Note on Method and Sources

This paper faces an evidentiary problem more severe than most cases in this series. The primary sources for Aztec civilization fall into three categories, all of them compromised. First: the pre-conquest pictorial manuscripts, most of which were destroyed on orders from within the Aztec imperial administration itself — a fact whose analytical significance the paper will address directly. Second: the post-conquest codices, produced after 1521 by indigenous scholars working under Spanish supervision, shaped by both the surviving oral tradition and the colonial framework within which that tradition was now being recorded. Third: the Spanish chronicles, produced by conquistadors, missionaries, and colonial administrators who had every institutional reason to emphasize the most dramatic and morally legible features of Aztec religious practice.

What survives is therefore partial, filtered through multiple interested parties, and should be read with the same methodology applied to the Hebrew Bible or the Chinese dynastic histories: not as neutral description but as products of the interests that produced them. Where the sources converge — where the Spanish accounts and the indigenous post-conquest manuscripts describe the same institutional arrangements, the same extraction mechanisms, and the same power structures — the convergence is evidence. Where they diverge, the divergence is usually more analytically interesting than either account alone.

The paper follows the evidence where it leads and is explicit about where it is reasoning from the framework rather than from specific documentation. The user's hypothesis about protection-tribute arrangements is addressed in its own section with an honest assessment of what can and cannot be established.

I. Who the Mexica Were Before They Controlled the Sun

The people who would eventually claim that the sun required their victims to rise each morning arrived in the Valley of Mexico as refugees. The Mexica — the specific group among the broader Nahua-speaking peoples who would build Tenochtitlan and conquer an empire — spent most of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries CE as wanderers and mercenaries, a mobile group without territory of their own, serving as soldiers for established powers in exchange for food, land use rights, and the right to exist in places they did not control. Their own historical traditions, recorded after the conquest, described this period as one of humiliation, servitude, and marginalization. They were the kind of people that established powers used and despised simultaneously: good fighters, politically unreliable, lacking the dynastic legitimacy and the patron-deity prestige that territorial lords required.

When they finally established a permanent settlement on islands in Lake Texcoco around 1325 CE, founding Tenochtitlan on what was then an unpromising swampy outcropping, they did so at the sufferance of the Tepanec empire of Azcapotzalco, whose paramount lord Tezozomoc allowed the Mexica settlement in exchange for military service. For roughly a century, the Mexica served the Tepanec as skilled auxiliaries — good enough fighters to be useful, politically subordinate enough to be manageable. They provided warriors for Tepanec campaigns. They received portions of the tribute extracted from conquered territories. They were clients of a regional power, not a regional power themselves.

The transformation from subordinate mercenary people to imperial center required both a military opportunity and a theological architecture that could convert military success into cosmic mandate. The military opportunity came in 1426-1428, when the Tepanec succession produced a crisis that the Mexica exploited through a combination of military alliance-building and political calculation. The theological architecture came from a single figure whose role in constructing the Aztec belief system is better documented than almost any other architect-stratum operator in ancient history.

His name was Tlacaelel.

II. Tlacaelel and the Manufactured Cosmos

Tlacaelel served as cihuacoatl — chief minister, a title literally meaning "snake woman" — under three successive Mexica rulers across roughly half a century, from about 1427 until his death sometime after 1480. He never held the supreme title of huey tlatoani, the Great Speaker who was the empire's nominal head. He operated in the position immediately below the throne, across the reigns of rulers he helped install and whose policy he shaped more thoroughly than the rulers themselves. Several post-conquest indigenous sources credit him explicitly with the specific ideological innovations that transformed Mexica religion from one regional variant of the

broader Mesoamerican tradition into the theological framework that sent tens of thousands of people to the sacrificial stone each year.

What Tlacaelel did was not subtle, and the sources are unusually direct about it. He ordered the burning of the existing pictorial manuscripts — the historical and religious records of the Mexica and the peoples around them — and the production of replacement records that told a different history. The account in the Codex Ramirez, compiled from indigenous oral tradition in the decades after the conquest, states the rationale directly: the old books contained accounts that were shameful to the Mexica, recording their subordinate status, their mercenary history, and their client relationship to the Tepanec lords they had just overthrown. The new books would tell a story in which the Mexica were not upstart refugees who had made good through military opportunism, but the chosen people of the supreme solar deity Huitzilopochtli, destined from the beginning to become the empire's center and the maintainers of cosmic order.

The burning and replacement of the historical record is the series' most explicit architect-stratum operation. Hilkiah's scroll in the Temple archive was a planted text presented as a discovery; the evidence for its deliberate production is inferential, assembled from the text's anachronisms and the timing of its discovery. Tlacaelel's burning of the existing records and commissioning of replacements is described explicitly in multiple post-conquest sources as a deliberate political act by a named individual with stated political motivations. He knew what he was doing. The Codex Ramirez preserves his argument for it: "It is not fitting that our enemies should know our beginnings, for we are still little, and we must be held as a great people."

The theological innovation that accompanied the historical revision was equally deliberate and equally consequential. Huitzilopochtli had been one deity among several in the pre-imperial Mexica tradition — their particular tribal patron, not a figure of obvious cosmological supremacy. Tlacaelel's reformation elevated him to the position of the solar deity whose daily journey across the sky required constant blood nourishment to continue. The cosmological framework this installed — the Fifth Sun mythology, in which the current age was the fifth attempt by the gods to create a stable world, each previous sun having been destroyed — provided the specific theological claim that made sacrifice not merely appropriate but cosmically necessary. The current sun had been created at Teotihuacan when the gods had sacrificed themselves to set it in motion. It required ongoing blood to maintain that motion. Without the sacrificial feeding of Huitzilopochtli, the sun would stop. Night would be permanent. The universe would end.

The scale of the cosmos that would be destroyed if the sacrifices stopped was not confined to the Mexica or their empire. It was the entire world. This is the theological move that converted the sacrifice system from a regional religious practice into a universal obligation — and that simultaneously converted the Mexica from one people among many into the indispensable maintainers of universal order. Every person living anywhere in the world depended on the Mexica performing their sacrificial function correctly. Every person living anywhere in the world therefore had a stake, whether they knew it or not, in the Mexica's military success and their maintenance of the sacrificial supply chain.

The Fifth Sun mythology also contained a specific provision about human blood that distinguished it from other Mesoamerican sacrifice traditions. Earlier Mesoamerican sacrificial practices, documented archaeologically from the Olmec period onward, involved a wide range of offerings — animals, food, valuables, and periodic human sacrifice. The Mexica system elevated human sacrifice to a qualitatively different level of necessity. The sun did not merely appreciate human blood as the most precious offering. It required it as fuel. The distinction between a gift and a payment for services rendered is the distinction between religious generosity and a cosmological protection racket, and Tlacaelel's theological framework placed the Mexica system firmly in the second category.

The question of how many people Tlacaelel believed in the theology he was constructing is the series' cleanest example of the unified-interest operator. He was a Mexica nobleman and a genuine religious practitioner. He believed in Huitzilopochtli. He performed the ritual obligations of his position with documented seriousness. He also understood, with the clarity that his position required, that the theological framework he was building served the Mexica imperial project's specific political and material interests at the precise moment when those interests required exactly such a framework. Whether he experienced his construction as theological recovery or political calculation — whether the two were distinguishable from inside his own mind — is the question the framework has learned not to answer. What is clear is that the result served both purposes simultaneously and that Tlacaelel was the architect who made them serve both at once.

III. The Sacrifice Economy: What the Blood Actually Produced

The great sacrificial events at the Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlan were public spectacles of extraordinary scale and deliberate theatrical design. The Templo Mayor itself — the twin-pyramid complex at the center of the capital, rebuilt and enlarged seven times across the imperial period — was positioned so that the sacrificial platform at its summit was visible from the enormous plaza below, where populations of tens of thousands could witness the ceremonies. The sacrificial victim was walked up the pyramid's steep stairs in full ceremonial dress, spread across the sacrificial stone at the summit, and had their heart removed by a priest using an obsidian blade. The heart was held up toward the sun, then placed in a stone receptacle. The body was rolled down the pyramid's stairs. The entire sequence, repeated for however many victims the ceremony required, was visible and audible — the drums, the chanting, the procession of victims, the bodies coming down the stairs — to everyone in the plaza below.

This was not private ritual. It was the most public possible demonstration of the theological claims the state required its population to accept. The sun needed blood. The Mexica provided it. Everyone present witnessed the provision. The connection between the sacrifice performed at the pyramid's summit and the sun's continued appearance the next morning was not argued

philosophically; it was demonstrated experientially, repeatedly, in the most viscerally memorable possible form. The sun had risen yesterday. The Mexica had sacrificed yesterday. The sun rose again today. The Mexica would sacrifice again. The inference was inescapable, and it was reinforced through an annual cycle of ceremonies tied to the agricultural calendar and the ritual calendar simultaneously, creating a structure in which virtually every significant moment of the year was connected to sacrificial ritual.

What the blood actually produced, in material terms, requires the same analytical move the series has applied to every other case: follow the resources and identify who received them.

The sacrificial victims were overwhelmingly war captives — prisoners taken in the specific military campaigns that the Mexica conducted for the explicit purpose of supplying the sacrifice system. The campaigns were successful conquests that produced two distinct resource flows simultaneously. The first was the captives themselves, walked back to Tenochtitlan, held in facilities until the appropriate ceremonial date, and then sacrificed. The second was the tribute — the systematic extraction of goods from conquered territories that formed the material basis of the Aztec empire's wealth.

The tribute system's scale is documented with unusual precision in the Matrícula de Tributos and its derivative the Codex Mendoza, tribute rolls produced under early colonial supervision that recorded what each of the roughly thirty-eight provinces of the empire owed to Tenochtitlan at regular intervals. The list includes cotton mantles by the tens of thousands, warrior costumes, jade and turquoise, feathers of specific species, gold dust, cacao, rubber balls, amber, copper bells, live eagles, and enormous quantities of staple foods — maize, beans, amaranth. A single tribute entry for one province might include 800 cotton cloaks, 800 decorated cloaks, and 1,600 plain cloaks delivered every eighty days, alongside 400 loads of cacao, 200 bowls of gold dust, and 40 jaguar skins per year. Multiply this across thirty-eight provinces and the quantity is staggering: the Aztec tribute system was extracting resources from hundreds of thousands of agricultural producers and funneling them into the capital at a scale that supported a city of perhaps 200,000 people — one of the largest urban populations in the world at the time — without that city being primarily a productive economy itself.

The distribution of these resources within Tenochtitlan follows the pattern the framework predicts. The tribute flowed to the ruling family, the noble class, the priestly establishment, and the professional warrior class in proportions that reflected their institutional positions within the imperial hierarchy. The common population of Tenochtitlan received reflected glory, the spectacle of imperial power, and the material benefits of living in a city supplied by an empire — but not a direct share of the tribute revenues. The specific goods that distinguished elite from commoner status — the feathered warrior costumes, the jade ornaments, the cacao that functioned as currency and luxury simultaneously — were monopolized by the class whose position the tribute system served.

The sacrifice narrative's function in this extraction economy was precisely what you identified: it provided the theological justification for the military campaigns whose material product was tribute, while framing the campaigns' primary purpose as cosmic obligation rather than

economic extraction. The army went to capture victims for the sun. The fact that capturing victims required conquering territories that then owed tribute to Tenochtitlan was presented as incidental to the primary cosmological mission. The warriors who fought were performing sacred service, not labor in an extraction economy. The captives who died were fulfilling a cosmic necessity, not being murdered to enrich the Mexica ruling class. The conquered populations who paid tribute were supporting the maintenance of universal order, not subsidizing an imperial capital whose ruling elite had found an extraordinarily efficient legitimation mechanism for their extraction apparatus.

IV. The Flower Wars and the Maintained Enemy

The most analytically striking institutional arrangement in the Aztec system — the one that reveals the sacrifice economy's internal logic most clearly — was the Flower War, the *xochiyaoyotl*, conducted primarily against the city-state of Tlaxcala and its allies in the highlands east of the Valley of Mexico.

The Flower War was not ordinary warfare. Both sides understood that the objective was not conquest but capture. Warriors fought to take prisoners rather than kill enemies. The engagements were scheduled in advance, conducted on mutually agreed terrain, and involved elite warrior units on both sides performing in front of audiences that included spectators from both communities. The captives taken on each side were returned to their home community as heroes after the engagement — wounded, but alive — while the prisoners taken by each side were eventually sacrificed. The Flower War was, in institutional form, a ritualized exchange in which both sides supplied each other with sacrificial victims while demonstrating martial prowess in a context that could not produce the messy political consequences of actual conquest.

The Tlaxcalans had been available as Flower War opponents since the 1450s, when the arrangement was formalized during the reign of Motecuhzoma I. By the time the Aztec empire reached its peak in the early sixteenth century, Tlaxcala was surrounded on three sides by territory under direct Aztec control or tributary obligation. The Aztec military capacity to conquer Tlaxcala outright was not seriously in question. The empire had absorbed polities far more powerful and far better defended than Tlaxcala. The decision not to conquer Tlaxcala, maintained across fifty years and multiple emperors, requires an explanation that the cosmological narrative alone cannot provide.

The explanation that emerges from reading the sources against their grain is the one the framework predicts: Tlaxcala was more valuable unconquered than conquered. As a tributary province, Tlaxcala would have provided cotton, cacao, and staple goods — valuable, but not uniquely so. As the maintained opponent in the Flower War, Tlaxcala provided a regular supply of high-quality sacrificial victims — elite warriors whose capture was ceremonially significant and whose sacrifice fed the sun in the most prestigious possible form — without the administrative

costs of incorporation and without the political complications of having extinguished a people the sacrifice mythology required to exist as opponents. The Tlaxcalans were, from the Aztec imperial perspective, a resource being managed rather than an enemy to be eliminated.

Whether the Tlaxcalan leadership understood this calculation and whether they accepted the Flower War arrangement because they had negotiated some form of mutual benefit from it — protection against Aztec absorption in exchange for serving as the sacrifice supply's regulated source — is a question the sources do not answer cleanly. What the sources do record is that the Tlaxcalan leadership maintained the Flower War arrangement without serious attempt to break it across decades during which their military capacity was not negligible. The Flower War's continued operation required cooperation from both sides, and cooperation is easier to understand if both sides were receiving something from the arrangement that simple conquest would have eliminated.

The Flower War arrangement also reveals the sacrifice economy's internal institutional logic at its most transparent: the supply of victims was managed, not random. The timing, the scale, and the source of sacrificial victims were all subject to decisions made within the Mexica institutional apparatus. When the great dedication ceremony for the expanded Templo Mayor was conducted in 1487 under Ahuitzotl — the ceremony in which thousands of prisoners were sacrificed over four days — the victims had been accumulated specifically for that event, their supply engineered through military campaigns conducted with the ceremony's requirements in mind. The sacrifice economy was not responding to a cosmic demand whose supply was uncontrollable. It was managing a supply chain whose scale and timing the ruling apparatus determined.

V. The Protection Question: What Can Be Established

Your hypothesis about protection-tribute arrangements — the possibility that village leaders in territories adjacent to Aztec military activity could pay to have their communities spared the sacrifice raids while the tribute paid was kept off the official records — is analytically plausible and structurally consistent with everything else the system reveals. Whether it can be positively established from the available evidence is a different question.

What can be established is this: the Aztec empire's territorial control was not uniform, and the distinction between directly conquered provinces, tribute-paying client states, and nominally independent communities varied considerably across the empire's geography. The *calpixque* — the tribute collectors stationed throughout the empire — operated in a system with known opportunities for both official and unofficial extraction. The tributary obligations recorded in the Matrícula de Tributos were the formal obligations; what was extracted beyond those formal obligations, in the form of gifts, local payments, and arrangements made with tribute collectors who were far from central oversight, is not documented in the tribute rolls precisely because such arrangements would not have been documented in them.

The institution of the *pochteca* — the long-distance merchant class that operated in advance of military conquest, gathering intelligence and establishing commercial relationships in territories not yet under Aztec political control — demonstrates that the empire's relationship with communities on its periphery was more complex than simple conquer-or-ignore. The pochteca moved through regions that would later be militarily incorporated, establishing commercial relationships before those regions were formally brought into the tribute system. The transition from commercial relationship to tribute obligation was gradual in many cases, not a single military event. Communities that had established relationships with pochteca merchants — relationships that involved regular goods transfers — were already in a structure of economic dependency before formal conquest made that dependency explicit.

The specific possibility of sacrifice-avoidance payments — tribute paid by village leaders to prevent their people from being targeted in the next raid — is harder to document but consistent with the institutional logic. The calpixque had enormous discretionary authority over how tribute collection was conducted locally. The warriors who conducted sacrifice raids operated with significant autonomy about which communities were targeted. The decisions about where the Flower Wars were conducted and which communities were raided for victims were made by people who had material interests in those decisions and who operated far from systematic oversight. The framework predicts that people in that position would have found ways to convert their discretionary authority into personal material benefit — that is what people in that position do, across every civilization this series has examined.

What can be said with confidence is that the sacrifice supply chain was managed, that the management required discretionary decisions about which communities were raided, that the people making those decisions had both the authority and the motivation to monetize their discretion, and that the official tribute records would not have captured payments made to avoid appearing on those same official tribute records. The absence of documentation is not evidence that the arrangements did not exist. It is the expected result if the arrangements did exist. Whether they did is a question the available evidence cannot definitively resolve, but the analytical framework gives you strong reasons to look for them and to treat their likely existence as part of the system's full operation.

VI. The Priestly Class and Its Institutional Interests

The tlamacazque — the Aztec priestly class — were not a separate profession in the sense that medieval European clergy were a separate profession. Entry into the priestly class was not permanently closed to warriors or administrators, and the same person could move between priestly and military roles across a career. But the priestly specializations that the sacrifice system required — the specific ritual knowledge, the ceremonial calendar, the correct performance of the hundreds of distinct ceremonies organized around the annual cycle — were concentrated in training institutions, the calmecac, that produced specialists whose expertise the system's operation required.

The priestly class's material position within the system was straightforward. The temples they administered controlled significant land grants, received portions of the tribute flowing into Tenochtitlan, and accumulated goods through the ceremonial donations that the ritual calendar generated. Feasts following major ceremonies involved distributions of food and goods that moved resources through the priestly institutions. The tlamacazque who performed the sacrifices at the Templo Mayor occupied the most prestigious ritual positions in the empire and were compensated accordingly in the goods, status, and access that compensation took in a society without coinage.

Their interpretive authority was the system's most important institutional feature from the framework's perspective. The ceremonial calendar — the interlock of the 365-day solar calendar and the 260-day ritual calendar that together created the 52-year cycle — was technical knowledge that the priestly specialists controlled. Determining which day was auspicious for which activity, when the sacrificial ceremonies were due, which deity required what specific form of offering, and how the various cosmic forces in alignment at any given moment should be managed required expertise that ordinary people did not possess and that the priestly class did. A ruler who needed to know whether a proposed military campaign was cosmologically sanctioned at the proposed timing needed the priests. A noble family planning a significant event needed the priests to determine the correct date. The priestly class's interpretive authority was embedded in a calendar system whose complexity guaranteed that authority would remain necessary.

The relationship between the priestly class and the military-nobility class that conducted the sacrifice raids was the system's internal tension point. The warriors who captured prisoners for sacrifice received honor — the taking of captives was the primary mechanism of social advancement for a commoner warrior, with each captive taken conferring additional status — but the material surplus generated by the tribute system flowed primarily through the noble class and the priestly establishment rather than to the warriors themselves. The warrior who took four captives was elevated to the Eagle or Jaguar warrior orders; he received better clothing, access to the elite warrior houses, and the right to eat and drink in the presence of lords. He did not receive a proportional share of the tribute that his military service made possible. The sacrifice narrative's function in managing this tension was to make the warrior's contribution cosmologically significant in a way that compensated emotionally and spiritually for what it did not compensate materially: fighting for the sun was its own reward, in a theology that made the sun's daily appearance the most visible evidence of the warriors' ongoing service.

VII. The System's Peripheral Logic: How Conquest Sustained Itself

The Aztec empire's expansion followed a pattern that the sacrifice theology made structurally necessary rather than merely desirable. The sacrifice system required a continuous supply of victims. Victims were war captives. War captives required wars. Wars produced conquests.

Conquests produced new territories. New territories required new military campaigns to pacify resistance and extract tribute. New territories' borders required additional wars to expand or defend them. The system was self-reinforcing in a way that made expansion not merely the product of imperial ambition but an operational requirement of the theological apparatus itself.

The scale of this requirement was not incidental. Estimates of annual sacrifice numbers in the Aztec system vary widely — Spanish sources often give figures that scholars consider exaggerated for rhetorical effect, while the archaeological and documentary evidence suggests a scale that was still extraordinary by any historical comparison. Inga Clendinnen, one of the most careful scholars of Aztec religion, estimates that the great cities of the empire might have witnessed several thousand sacrifices per year across the major ceremonial events, with the overall imperial total potentially reaching into the tens of thousands annually. Whatever the precise number, the institutional point is clear: a sacrifice system operating at this scale required a military system capable of producing captives at this scale, which in turn required an empire conducting military campaigns capable of producing captives at this scale, which required the empire to be continuously expanding or continuously conducting the Flower War arrangements that maintained the captive supply from existing opponents.

The communities that paid tribute but were not under direct military occupation — the thirty-eight provinces plus the client relationships on the empire's periphery — were in a specific relationship to this requirement. Their tribute funded the military apparatus that conducted the raids. Their relative security from being raided themselves depended on the raids being conducted elsewhere. The tribute payment was simultaneously an extraction payment and a protection payment, whether or not it was explicitly understood as such by the paying communities. The Mexica did not need to articulate the protection logic directly. The logic operated through the simple fact that communities which paid tribute were not raided for victims, while communities that refused tribute or resisted incorporation were exactly the communities from which the next raid would proceed.

This created a graduated relationship between the imperial center and its periphery that had both an official dimension — the tribute rolls, the calpixque, the formal imperial administration — and an unofficial dimension that was no less real for being undocumented. The official dimension was the tribute obligation recorded in the Matrícula de Tributos. The unofficial dimension was the implicit understanding, operating in every community on the empire's periphery, about what happened to communities that did not find a way to accommodate the imperial apparatus. The sacrifice mythology gave the imperial apparatus a cosmological mandate for its expansion that transcended any specific political negotiation. The sun required blood. The blood had to come from somewhere. Communities that wanted that somewhere to not be them had strong incentives to find accommodation.

VIII. Why Cortés Needed Ninety Thousand Allies

The Spanish conquest of the Aztec empire between 1519 and 1521 is frequently narrated as the triumph of European military technology — steel armor, firearms, horses — over a civilization that had none of these. This narrative is demographically impossible. Hernán Cortés arrived in Mexico with roughly five hundred soldiers. The Aztec empire's military could field tens of thousands of experienced warriors and had been conducting successful campaigns against sophisticated opponents for a century. Five hundred men with better weapons do not conquer an empire of several million people.

What actually happened is analytically more revealing than the technology narrative. By the time Cortés besieged Tenochtitlan in 1521, he was commanding an allied force of roughly ninety thousand indigenous warriors, drawn primarily from the Tlaxcalans and from a series of other peoples who had been under Aztec tribute obligation or military pressure for decades. The Tlaxcalans, who had been maintained as the Flower War's permanent opponents for fifty years, joined the Spanish alliance almost immediately upon Cortés's arrival in their territory. The offer was straightforward: help the Spanish defeat the Mexica, and the tribute obligation ends. The Tlaxcalan leadership accepted within days.

The speed of that acceptance, and the scale of the allied force that assembled around the Spanish core, is the Aztec system's most precise measure of how thoroughly the extraction apparatus had failed at the one task every belief infrastructure must accomplish to survive: making the population subject to it experience the arrangement as the natural order rather than as organized predation. The communities that had been paying tribute to Tenochtitlan for generations did not rise spontaneously against the empire without an external catalyst — the system had managed their compliance effectively enough to prevent that. But the moment an external military force appeared that offered a credible alternative to the tribute obligation, the loyalty that the sacrifice mythology was supposed to generate did not materialize. The communities that had been convinced by the cosmological narrative that the sun required Mexica sacrificial service did not, when tested, believe in the claim enough to fight and die for it against people who were offering them an exit.

The Tlaxcalans knew something that the sacrifice mythology needed them not to know: the sun had been rising every morning in Tlaxcala too, without any Mexica performing sacrifices on their behalf. The cosmological claim that the Mexica were the indispensable maintainers of universal order was not something that could survive examination by people who had watched the same sun rise from the other side of the tribute arrangement. The mythology worked for the people performing it. It did not work for the people being extracted by it.

This is the system's deepest structural weakness, and it is precisely the weakness that the karma-dharma architecture avoided so successfully in the Indian case. The Brahmin theology did not merely claim that Brahmin ritual was cosmically necessary. It claimed that each person's birth position was the precise product of their own prior actions — a claim addressed to each individual person as a statement about their own spiritual history. The Aztec theology claimed that the Mexica specifically were the sun's chosen maintainers — a claim addressed to the Mexica themselves, which told everyone else that they were simply the resource being managed for someone else's cosmic mission. The Indian architecture made compliance feel like

personal spiritual virtue. The Aztec architecture made compliance feel like tribute, which is what it was.

IX. Framework Assessment: What the Aztec Case Adds

The Aztec case is the series' most explicit example of a belief infrastructure being constructed at a documented historical moment by a documented individual — Tlacaelel — for documented political purposes, including the burning of the preceding record and its replacement with a revised account. The clarity of the construction moment, combined with the transparency of the extraction mechanism it legitimated, makes this the case where the architect-stratum operation is least ambiguous and most visible.

Three findings deserve specific attention as additions to the framework's cumulative understanding.

The supply chain as the mechanism's tell. The sacrifice system's most analytically revealing feature is that its victim supply was managed rather than random. The Flower War's scheduling, the accumulated victims for the Templo Mayor dedication, the selection of which territories were raided and when — all of this reveals an extraction apparatus making deliberate decisions about the resource it was extracting, which is exactly what an extraction apparatus does and exactly what a genuine cosmic necessity would not require. If the sun truly needed blood to rise, any blood at any time would serve the purpose. The systematic preference for elite warrior captives taken in ritualized combat — the most expensive possible victim supply chain — reveals institutional interests (the demonstration of military supremacy, the maintenance of the warrior class's honor economy) operating inside the theological claim about what the sun required.

The maintained enemy as institutional evidence. The decision not to conquer Tlaxcala, maintained across fifty years of imperial expansion that absorbed far stronger opponents, is the clearest evidence that the sacrifice system's institutional logic was driving strategic decisions that purely military or political logic would not have produced. Empires conquer their opponents. An empire that deliberately maintains an opponent — surrounds it, controls access to its markets, limits its political options, but does not absorb it — is managing a resource rather than pursuing a strategic objective. The framework predicts that resources will be managed in the interest of those doing the managing. The Flower War with Tlaxcala is the prediction's confirmation.

The collapse as the system's limit test. Every belief infrastructure examined in this series has been tested by external challenge at some point. The Chinese system survived the Mongol and Manchu conquests because it provided those conquerors with exactly the administrative apparatus they needed to govern their acquisition. The Brahmin system survived Islamic conquest because it provided Muslim administrators with exactly the revenue management and local governance expertise they needed. The Aztec system failed the same test because it had

produced exactly the opposite conditions: a periphery of resentful tribute-payers whose strongest institutional memory was the sacrifice raids, not the cosmic order those raids maintained. The difference between the systems that survived conquest and the system that did not is a measure of how thoroughly each system had addressed the compliance problem at the base level. The Indian system told the people at the bottom that their position was cosmically just and that accepting it faithfully was spiritually virtuous. The Aztec system told the people at the bottom that their tribute was feeding someone else's deity, and then sent soldiers to take their people for sacrifice when the tribute was late. The first produces compliance that survives political disruption. The second produces resentment that waits for a disruption to express itself.

The Aztec case also provides the framework with its most explicit ancient example of what the Third Analytical Refinement identifies as the architect-stratum operator with full awareness — a named individual, Tlacaelel, who burned the existing record, commissioned a replacement, elevated a tribal deity to cosmic supremacy, and articulated the political motivation for doing so. The series has inferred this operator in other cases from the evidence of what they produced. The Aztec case allows the inference to be stated as historical fact. That Tlacaelel also almost certainly believed in Huitzilopochtli, performed his ritual obligations sincerely, and experienced his theological construction as theological recovery rather than political fabrication — this is what the Third Refinement predicts, and the Aztec case confirms it.

Principal Sources and Further Reading

Primary and Near-Primary Sources

Berdan, Frances F., and Patricia Rieff Anawalt, eds. *The Codex Mendoza*. 4 vols. University of California Press, 1992.

Díaz del Castillo, Bernal. *The History of the Conquest of New Spain*. Ed. and trans. David Carrasco. University of New Mexico Press, 2008.

Sahagún, Bernardino de. *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*. Trans. Arthur J.O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble. 13 vols. School of American Research and University of Utah, 1950-1982.

Matrícula de Tributos. Facsimile ed. Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público, 1991.

The Aztec Political System and Imperial Structure

Berdan, Frances F. *The Aztecs of Central Mexico: An Imperial Society*. 2nd ed. Wadsworth, 2004.

Berdan, Frances F., et al. *Aztec Imperial Strategies*. Dumbarton Oaks, 1996.

Carrasco, Pedro. *The Tenochca Empire of Ancient Mexico: The Triple Alliance of Tenochtitlan, Tetzcoco, and Tlacopan*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1999.

Smith, Michael E. *The Aztecs*. 3rd ed. Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

Tlacaelel and the Ideological Reformation

León-Portilla, Miguel. *Aztec Thought and Culture: A Study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind*. Trans. Jack Emory Davis. University of Oklahoma Press, 1963.

Gillespie, Susan D. *The Aztec Kings: The Construction of Rulership in Mexica History*. University of Arizona Press, 1989.

Davies, Nigel. *The Aztec Empire: The Toltec Resurgence*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1987.

The Sacrifice System

Carrasco, David. *City of Sacrifice: The Aztec Empire and the Role of Violence*. Beacon Press, 1999.

Clendinnen, Inga. *Aztecs: An Interpretation*. Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Hassig, Ross. *War and Society in Ancient Mesoamerica*. University of California Press, 1992.

Isaac, Barry L. "The Aztec 'Flowery War': A Geopolitical Explanation." *Journal of Anthropological Research* 39, no. 4 (1983): 415-432.

The Tribute System and Political Economy

Hicks, Frederic. "Dependent Labor in Prehispanic Mexico." *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl* 11 (1974): 243-266.

Hodge, Mary G., and Michael E. Smith, eds. *Economies and Polities in the Aztec Realm*. Institute for Mesoamerican Studies, 1994.

Rojas, José Luis de. *Mexico-Tenochtitlan: Economy and Society in the Sixteenth Century*. Trans. Juan José Utrilla. University of Texas Press, 2012.

The Conquest and the Alliance System

Hassig, Ross. *Mexico and the Spanish Conquest*. 2nd ed. University of Oklahoma Press, 2006.

Restall, Matthew. *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*. Oxford University Press, 2003.

Townsend, Camilla. *Fifth Sun: A New History of the Aztecs*. Oxford University Press, 2019.

Wood, Stephanie. *Transcending Conquest: Nahua Views of Spanish Colonial Mexico*. University of Oklahoma Press, 2003.

A case study applying the Analytical Framework for Elite Power and Belief Systems (V3.0) and the Three Analytical Refinements.

For academic and analytical purposes only.

© 2026 Thomas J. Bryan. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International.

Research and composition by Claude (Anthropic).